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ABSTRACT

A cooperative writing workshop that attempts to engage first-term college freshmen in a variety of genuine writing problems by stressing the class as audience, the use of daily journals, feedback from small group discussions, and frequent revision is described in the first part of this document. The remainder of the paper presents a case study of one student's progress and the contribution of group discussion to his writing process. After first explaining that data were gathered through recording student meetings and teacher student conferences as well as from reviewing writing folders and student protocols, this section of the paper contains some of the student's actual journal entries and revisions from one of his semester projects. (JL)

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Discovering Audience/Inventing Purpose: A Case Study of Revision in a Cooperative Writing Workshop

Recent composing process studies have characterized mature writers' processes as elaborate and recursive, revision grounded in the writer's active construction and reconstruction of a rhetorical situation. The same literature describes most student composing as inflexible, immature writers either so immersed in their subjects that they neglect rhetorical concerns or so overwhelmed by rules, real or imagined, that their processes are crippled.[1] As a result, we have seen far more attention in instruction to rhetorical issues, for example, assignments that specify audience and purpose, adaptations of the case approach, and audience-based heuristics. However, in reviewing several studies which indicate no relationship between the most carefully constructed assignments and the resulting modes of student writing, James Hoeker has suggested that "most students, regardless of what role they are asked to assume or what audience they are asked to imagine, write for what they imagine is their real audience--hypercritical English teachers."[2] Although Hoeker refers to testing situations, our experiences suggest that it isn't all that different in the classroom. Our students know, after all, that we will read and grade their papers.

Don Graves has shown us that very young children write more frequently, more genuinely and at greater length when they are allowed to choose both their topics and occasions for writing.[3] However, he has recently lamented that by the seventh grade, most students have lost the ability to choose their own topics because, since the second grade, they've been put on "writer's welfare."[4] Our problem then is to get our students off the dole, to return

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to them that which is the genuine writer's most cherished possession, her own authority.

In this article, I will be sharing some of my observations of first-term freshmen at work in a cooperative writing workshop.[5] My students have but one assignment, one that is every genuine writer's: "What is that special something that you know but, chances are, others don't but would benefit from knowing?" In their work on three projects, students consider the class as their audience. They experiment with ideas for their projects in daily journals. Most class time is spent in small group discussion sharing journal entries, talking about projects and plans, and reviewing drafts. On occasion, each group will read another's drafts and prepare collaboratively written critiques. I introduce critical concepts and accompanying discussion guides which raise such issues as: focus, audience, purpose, expertise, support, lead, voice, and organization. I also participate in group discussion and hold conferences. My intent is to create an environment in which students actively participate in a variety of genuine writing problems as both readers and writers. Although I do not assign grades at any time during the term, I do periodically collect and respond in writing to project folders which contain a typed, edited version and all related drafts and journal work. I expect students to continue to revise their projects throughout the term. For their final assignment, they write essays which review and evaluate the contents of their writing folders. During our exam week, I hold conferences to discuss these evaluations. At that time, I assign a grade for the course.

The range of writing and the considerable and sometimes elaborate revision which has resulted has been impressive. Students' processes in the workshop setting seem to better reflect those of mature writers than those of students in traditional classrooms which teach the conventions of a

particular discourse mode and subsequently assign topics. We have seen in the work of Flower and Hayes that expert writers, even when they are presented with assignments which designate audience and purpose, actually create for themselves the writing problems they solve. Students in the cooperative writing workshop similarly make inferences about their audiences and these in turn help them to determine their plans and goals.

To document this process and to better understand its dynamics, I recorded all meetings of a group of five students in two of my classes, reviewed their writing folders, recorded conferences, and gathered protocols as each subject worked on three drafts of a single paper. I will here review what I learned of one student's progress and the contribution of group discussion to his process. Two of my principal questions in conducting this investigation were quite simply: 1) What goes on in the groups when I'm not there?, and 2) Is what goes on when I'm not there of any value? My review of the transcripts of discussions coupled with the analysis of student composing suggests that such talk is indeed helpful to writers in developing their sense of audience and in their subsequent planning of appropriate rhetorical strategies. Most often, this understanding of audience was far more important to the writer's progress than the direct advice for revision offered by members of the group. This can be seen in Steve's work on his first project of the term.

During an early meeting, Steve shared a journal entry on his experience growing up on a family farm:

> I have worked on our farm since I was a little kid. I remember when I was about 4 or 5 that was my biggest thrill was going out and helping my dad, (even though when I look back at it I know I was probably more of a nuisance than anything else). As I grew older my dad of course

> expected more of me. I remember I get so mad at my dad when I was about 11-12 for making me get up at 7:00 am to go to work when none of the other kids my age had to. But know I relly enjoy getting up going to work all day whether It's menial labor or driving tractor. I personally can't see how someone couldn't get you to work out in the out of doors all day long sure it's tedious work and hard sometimes, But when you get done with a job like pruining and in six months you see how much good it did it makes you feel good inside.

In the ensuing discussion, the group asked about the farm, the work, its crops and acreage. They were especially impressed with the size of the farm and its business-like organization. Steve discussed wages and management structure. The group was not able to help Steve decide on just how he would approach the paper. In fact, their suggestions more often displayed their ignorance of the subject. For example, when Dan suggested that Steve might focus on his work with one particular crop, Steve explained that such an approach wouldn't really reflect his job:

> Well actually, I don't just work with cherry trees or just work with apple trees, like, you know, one week, all week I might just be mowing orchards and the next week I might be weedspraying orchards or pruning orchards. Or I might be out working with the asparagus crew and then we have peaches and strawberries and plums.

The discussion did, however, serve to give Steve a sense of his audience. All but Mitch had grown up in suburbia. Mitch shared some of his own experiences of farmwork and compared notes with Steve. He remarked, "I'd always tell people I'm working on this farm and nobody ever knows what I'm talking about." Steve agreed.

The next day, Steve wrote a draft. He described his farm, covering much

of the material that had been discussed with the group. Overall, his approach was chronological, informative and descriptive. However, his concluding paragraph showed evidence of the germ of a quite different rhetorical strategy. He wrote:

> Farming is no longer a business for a fifty year old man with a straw hat wearing bib overhauls. Unfortunately farming has become a business . . . that takes a tremendous amount of capital.

Steve had been thinking about his audience, and his subsequent analysis would lead to a new plan for the paper. The next day he wrote in his journal:

> Before . . . I was going to be a lot more general and just talk about the basics of farm life. But then when I had that free writing for ten minutes, I found myself feeling that people really don't understand agriculture at all. And that a lot of people think of it not as a business but as a job that some stupid S.O.B. does. I've decided to be a modern day Don Quixote and set the record straight. That farming is a business that requires smarts and that it is a very modernized industry.

Having discovered his audience and his purpose, Steve went on to experiment in his journal with strategies for his paper. In the next meeting with his group, he asked their opinions on alternative approaches he'd developed. In the first version, he attempted a chronological account. He began:

> My Great Grandpa arrived in Michigan in 1882. He arrived with his wife and oldest son. They traveled from Detroit to Benzie County where they bought 120 acres. . . .

Another approach tackled the problem, as he saw it, head on:

> For those of you who have breathed the city smog all your life or

lived in suburbia somewhere this paper will totally destroy the Green Acres stereotype that you have about farmers. . . .

A third was similar to the second but here relied on imagery:

My dad does own a suit but not only for church. He also wears them for business meetings. Now that may be hard for most of you who probably imagine my dad with a pair of bib overhauls and straw hat out driving a tractor, and not behind a desk. . . .

His last was more abstract and academic:

American Agriculture has developed into the most modern agricultural system in the world. . . .

Steve introduced his leads by telling the group of his new purpose, "All you've got to remember is that I want to make the paper more towards how farming has gone from, meaning the stereotype to modern industry." Although he was hoping that the group would help him decide which was best, he found that they couldn't agree. Then Dan suggested that he might combine his last lead with the second. Steve tried it. Dan then added a sentence from the third version. David then offered an alternative combination.

When Steve went on to work on subsequent drafts, he soon rejected the awkward combinations suggested by the group. However, he had learned that different elements had appealed to his readers. They saw that he had a general point to make but were most persuaded by specific examples from his experience. They discouraged Steve from using the chronological approach that he had first attempted. For his final draft, Steve did incorporate elements of the earlier versions as well as develop a comparison/contrast approach that he'd implied in his first comment to the group but had not yet written. This version began:

Those of you who have inhaled the city smog or lived in suburbia all

> your life don't realize that America's Agriculture is the most modern in the world. Our farming practices, strains of crops and technology are superior to any other country's agricultural industry. The American farmer is probably unlike the way you invision him. The American farmer of today is college-educated, informed of the business world, spends more time making business decisions than actually working out in the field. He is still as hard working as ever usually working six days a week, nine to ten hours a day. Durring peak times such as harvest and planting, it will increase to seven days a week, twelve to thirteen hours a day.

Steve went on to compare changes in mechanization, safety, communications and record-keeping (his father had recently purchased a computer) over the past twenty years. While the final version was still somewhat inconsistent and unpolished, Steve had succeeded in discovering both something that he had wanted to say and an effective strategy for saying it. With the information he had gained from the group discussion and with the freedom to use this knowledge to invent his own topic, Steve had begun to learn to write, like a writer.

Notes

1. See, for instance, L. Flower and J. R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery," College Composition and Communication, 31 (February, 1980), 21-32; N. Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Expert Writers," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December, 1980), 378-388; S. Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 14 (December, 1979), 317-336; S. Pianko, "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 13 (February, 1979), 5-22.

2. James Hoeker, "Essay Examination Topics and Students' Writing," College Composition and Communication, 33 (December,1982), 387.

3. Donald H. Graves, "An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven Year Old Children," Research in the Teaching of English, 9 (Winter 1975), 227-241.

4. Donald H. Graves, "Break the Welfare Cycle: Let Writers Choose Their Topics," fForum, (Winter 1982), 75.

5. I owe much of the design and inspiration for this course to a model first developed by Dixie Gowswami and Hal Douglas at Middlesex County (NJ) College.